

Testimony of Jacki McKinney, MSW
To the Policy Committee
Of the White House Conference on Aging
The Implications of the Increasing Diversity of Mid-Life and Older Americans for
the Mental Health Workforce: A Consumer's Perspective
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My name is Jacki McKinney and I am a family advocate specializing in mental health issues affecting African-American women and families. I am a founding member of the National People of Color Consumer/Survivor Network and a member of the board of trustees of the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. My motto in advocating for rights and choice is "nothing about us without us."

I wish to speak in particular about African Americans who are growing old in this country, whose issues are hidden among the many inequities of aging. The oldest among them were denied their civil rights and full participation in this society in their youth, due to racism and discrimination. Many did not pay into Social Security because they worked at menial jobs for the most minimal wages. Today, however, America's health strategy is that your life can only be as full as your purse. The best care is only available for the most money. Our seniors have the smallest checks/income and qualify for the lowest level of care and the least Social Security, if any at all.

The major issue for these seniors is assisted living. Yet current programs are designed for the wealthy or well-off. So poor people are relegated to nursing homes, even though they don't want or need that level of care. The nursing home becomes a prison for a person who is not sick but just needs some support. The alternative is a boarding home designed for people on SSI, who usually have long-term mental health issues, and that is not a supportive environment for enjoying a full life.

Medications have improved in recent years and society has become more enlightened around mental health issues. There is a large body of persons like me who, at age 40, 50, even 60 are recovering, released from institutions and entering the workforce and community for the first time. They need attention.

Let me tell you how I live.

I am 70 years old and the caregiver for my 90-year old mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's and is unable to care for herself. And for the past 10 years I have been caretaker of eight grandchildren.

Four of my 10 granddaughters continue to live with me. The oldest is 27 and has a 5-year-old and a 3-year-old. The next is 24, with a 3-year-old and a 1-year-old. The next is 18 and has a 2-year-old. The youngest is enrolled in her first year of college at the local state university. Six women and five children--we all live together in one house. I am the main source of support.

Their struggles and dreams to complete school and become self-sufficient are only as real as my ability to maintain the home and support them. This house of cards will crash if I do not support it. Yet we are not considered a family by most of the needs-based programs of support!

In my work I meet seniors, women who are struggling with the same issues, sandwiched between the needs of two generations. They are unable to buy a home, prepare for retirement or save money. Their parents, like my children, are struggling with issues of recovery and have histories of homelessness, mental health issues, institutionization, drug and alcohol addiction and all the accompanying problems. They have little or no work history. If I live another 10 or 15 years, I will have no one to depend on as a support system, because my children in their 50s and 60s will be dependent on their children at the same time I become in need of support.

I call this phenomenon the “double doomers.”

I am suggesting that Americans need a single standard of care and living for all seniors. I have contributed everything I have to raise my grandchildren and keep my mother at home, removing the burden from the taxpayers. There are thousands like me. Wouldn't it be ironic if after years of struggle to recover, rejoin society, raise my grandchildren, removing the burden from the state and my community, I find myself living in the same conditions of poverty, isolation, poor living conditions that I fought so hard to recover from?

Thank you for your time.